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WOMAN DIES IN TWENTYNINE PALMS HOUSE FIRE

Staff Writer, Z107.7 FM News

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An elderly woman died during a house fire in Twentynine Palms Friday. According to **County Fire** Battalion Chief Donnie Viloría, firefighters from Twentynine Palms, Joshua Tree, and the Combat Center were called to the fire in the 74500 block of Baseline Road just after 3 p.m. with a possible resident trapped inside the house. Crews arrived to find heavy smoke and flames billowing from a large window in the front of the house. Viloría said firefighters entered the home and found a woman, identified as Helen Garrett, 67, unconscious and unresponsive, in the living room. Paramedics attempted life-saving measures, but Garrett died at the scene from airway injuries consistent with the high temperatures found inside the structure. Firefighters had the blaze knocked down in 10 minutes. The cause of the fire is under investigation.

Viloría added that firefighters were called to yet another suspicious fire in Wonder Valley later that night. About 1:30 a.m., they were called to a fire at an abandoned cabin off of Blower and Pipeline. This is the fourth suspicious fire in Twentynine Palms and Wonder Valley in about two weeks.

Firefighters were called to a 2:30 a.m. motorhome fire in the area of Valle Vista and El Portal Avenue in the Desert Heights area of Twentynine Palms on April 22. And on April 19, firefighters responded to two fires on one at 12:51 a.m. in the area of Valle Vista and Barbara Lane, which burned two motor homes; and then an abandoned single-family home in the 1500 block of Bermuda Avenue at 2:22 a.m. All the fires are suspicious in nature.

<http://z1077fm.com/woman-dies-in-twentynine-palms-house-fire/>

Coronavirus Curtails Police Explorer Programs in Southern California

Eric Licas, The Orange County Register / Daily Bulletin

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Aylin Alfaro (R), 18, tosses a roll of toilet paper to fellow Long Beach Police Department Explorer Abigail Duarte (L), 17. The two volunteered to help collect unused supplies on Tuesday, April 14, from trailers that would have been intended for first responders suspected of exposure to the novel coronavirus. This was the first time the two friends had seen each other since California Gov. Gavin Newsom implemented a statewide stay-at-home directive on March 19. (Eric Licas, Orange County Register/SCNG).

LONG BEACH, California -- Israel Anaya-Morales felt fortunate to keep his job at In-N-Out in Signal Hill. But, like most Californians, his life changed drastically following the emergence of coronavirus this spring.

The Cal State Fullerton student's routine shifted from shuttling between work, classes and volunteer opportunities to finding himself restless at home in between shifts and digital lectures amidst the global crisis.

The 20-year-old lieutenant in the Long Beach Police Department's Explorer Post is one of hundreds of volunteers statewide, both young and old, who were participating in a variety of police and fire department programs that have been suspended or moved to online formats because of the pandemic.

Changes in these outreach efforts illustrate how dramatically COVID-19 has altered the way people live in California. Many explorers like Anaya-Morales said it has been difficult to adapt to a new normal that includes distance education and a prohibition on public gatherings. But they are trained to persevere.

Pushed to endure physically and mentally

Anaya-Morales has had a lot of time to reminisce lately. He remembers losing count of the push-ups he had done by the time the first dropouts had begun to withdraw from the 2014 Orange County Sheriff's Explorer Academy. He was 15 years old then, and didn't blame those other kids for opting out of the near-constant scrutiny from screaming drill sergeants and rigorous physical training. The trainees were all volunteers, after all, and free to leave at will.

For him and many of his fellow explorers, the stressors that led some to quit were an essential part of a training exercise that became a right of passage.

"The way I see it, if I can't endure a friendly person, somebody who I know won't actually hurt me, yelling at me, telling me to do 15 push ups and then 30 burpees and then run all the way to the gate, which could be 300 meters away, and back in 30 seconds," Anaya-Morales said. "If I can't handle that, then how am I going to be able to handle people of the public yelling obscenities at me, wishing horrible things upon me or coworkers?"

The well-meaning antagonism from instructors became a motivating force for Anaya-Morales during the academy. He's not sure how he would have passed the initiation process without that "simulated stress" and the camaraderie that grew between the explorer trainees who worked their way through it, shoulder to shoulder with him.

But those who had hoped to join police and fire department explorer posts during the summer of 2020 likely won't get the same treatment he received, as a result of mandatory stay-at-home orders implemented statewide by Gov. Gavin Newsom on March 19. Many trainees will have to skip the academy altogether this year.

"The Department has suspended all volunteer programs, including the Explorer program," wrote Juan Silva, a spokesman for the Riverside County Sheriff's Department, in an e-mail. "We want the public to adhere with public health recommendations and the Governor's order. We don't want to expose any program participants to the virus."

Exploring a career in public safety

Exploring is a vocational mentoring program that began as an offshoot of the Boy Scouts of America. It places young people between ages 14 and 21 into volunteer positions at local posts across the country.

Those offer hands-on experience in one of 12 career fields. Youths involved with posts at fire departments and law enforcement agencies take part in training academies and competitions that test explorers' minds, bodies and determination.

Explorer posts have been a powerful recruitment tool for police and fire departments, and most advisors involved with them are optimistic the program will survive. They also acknowledge that the health and safety of the young people they mentor has to take priority over their development as potential emergency-responders.

In search of connection

All in-person meetings for the California Highway Patrol's 66 explorer posts have been suspended, and a two-day competition that would have begun on April 24 was cancelled, CHP Capt. Steve West said. It's unclear if an academy scheduled for July through August in Sacramento will proceed.

Some of the agency's 506 explorers, based out of posts throughout the state, have sent each other workout instructions and turned to the internet to find other ways of staying in touch. But West acknowledges that web-based interactions can't deliver the same experience as face-to-face gatherings.

"There is a lack of that connection," West said. "But we are adaptive, I think, just like every part of society in the United States. We are resilient people and we are finding ways to make due with what we have until we get through this. And we will get through it."

All volunteer programs for the **San Bernardino County** Sheriff's and **Fire** Departments were similarly placed on hiatus, according to representatives from both agencies. Officials are still receiving and reviewing applications from youths interested in joining one of the Fire Department's 11 explorer posts, but all in-person activities have been cancelled for the foreseeable future, County Fire Department Capt. Jay Hausman said.

That includes this year's California Fire Explorers Association Academy, which was supposed to have taken place in San Bernardino March 22-March 28. The annual event welcomes explorers from throughout the state and parts of Nevada. Roughly 175 teens and young adults would have bunked in the San Geronio High School gymnasium and taken part in mock rescues and exercises featuring live fire.

However, an entire year's worth of preparation for the event had to be cast aside in the interest of preventing a potential outbreak of COVID-19, Hausman said.

"If one of them would have contracted it prior to getting here it could have spread like wildfire through the explorer ranks," he said. "So, I think it was the right decision to make by the state association as well as the San Bernardino County Fire Department. But I'm sure a lot of explorers were looking forward to it."

A loss of motivation

Lockdown has been a drag, said Adrian Alfaro, 19. He used to get together with friends for pickup soccer and basketball games five times a week. That was before stay-at-home orders went into effect in Anaheim. Since then, he has tried to keep himself in shape by jumping rope and jogging alone, but his workouts just haven't been the same.

As captain of the Anaheim Police Department's Explorer post, Alfaro also took passion in preparing new recruits for the academy. It was his job to push and motivate trainees through a strict exercise regimen each Sunday in preparation for the initiation process. He has felt somewhat lost recently, now that those pre-academy sessions have been cancelled.

"I haven't been talking to other explorers about what they've been doing or how they're doing because, to be honest with you, I don't know if this academy in August is going to happen because of this virus," Alfaro said.

That event has indeed been cancelled, according to Orange County Sheriff's Department spokeswoman Carrie Braun. The status of explorer gatherings scheduled through the remainder of 2020 is unclear.

The regular Tuesday meetings of the Anaheim post have also been temporarily suspended, said the program's adviser, Anaheim Police Officer Staci Dietz. However, she's developing an online curriculum so that her volunteers can continue to learn, refine their existing skills and, most importantly, stay in touch with one another.

Persevering in the digital age

At least 160 potential volunteers were three sessions into the 16-week Los Angeles County Sheriff's Explorer Academy, which began on Saturday, Feb. 1, before all public gatherings in California were prohibited for the foreseeable future, Lt. Rob Medrano said. Instead of dismissing the work those young people had already committed, he and his drill sergeants took inspiration from California's school system and shifted their program to a distance-learning format.

"For some of these kids, they are at that age where this would have been, if it had not been for us adjusting, their last academy or chance to get into the program before they age out," said Mike Ramirez, one of the LASD sergeants overseeing the online program.

This year's recruits virtually attend live meetings via Facebook held Saturdays at 8 a.m., which run a total of about two hours. Instructors cover all of the lecture topics included in the academy's regular curriculum, and cadets are able to send questions in real time to a second drill sergeant or staff member moderating each session. Recordings of lectures are available for only a brief window of time after meetings in an effort to promote accountability.

"It went really well," explorer cadet Justine Plowman, 18, said shortly after attending an online session on Saturday, March 7. "We had a guest speaker come in and he talked to us about, like, safe teenage driving, and just to be more careful on the road."

In between lectures, she and the other cadets are assigned two essays each week, just like they would have been during a regular academy. But instead of sweating side by side through physical training together, this year's trainees must submit a log with a checklist of exercises they must perform on their own. They don't have to wear their uniforms, which means nobody is getting chewed out for dress code errors that might have been caught by discerning instructors.

"You do lose some impact when you're not here physically," Medrano said. "That's just the way it is when you don't have that physical interaction. That goes with school kids too. My kids are learning online right now, and you lose that sense of intimacy."

A chance to finally get out of the house

As part of the city's Incident Management Team, Long Beach Police Detective Sondra Ledesma's schedule grew tighter and tighter as agencies scrambled to respond to the emergence of COVID-19. So, she was thankful she was able to call upon six young volunteers from her department's explorer post on Tuesday, April 14, to help her gather toilet paper, soap, dishes, blankets and other supplies that had been distributed to an unused quarantine center, and pack it all up for later use.

On rare occasions, a few members of the post have been permitted to work on tasks related to COVID-19 suppression efforts in settings deemed safe and consistent with social distancing measures. Although the volunteers' safety remains the top priority of the LBPD's Explorer Post, the coronavirus pandemic has allowed some of them to get a behind-the-scenes look at how emergency service agencies operate during a crisis, the program's advisor, Karen Owens, said.

"Plus, I really miss having them around," Ledesma said through a disposable mask. "It's been tough not being able to see their faces."

The bottom half of the volunteers' expressions were obscured by bandannas as they got to work at about 10 a.m., in small groups at an open lot next to a grassy park. They laughed and told jokes while tossing kitchenware or toiletries to each other and taping up boxes, suggesting smiles beneath the cloth covering their mouths and noses.

"It's a chance to finally get out of the house!" Abigail Duarte, 15, said while helping her friend and fellow volunteer, Ashly Bello, 17, fold a bed sheet. "And I haven't seen her in a month!" she added.

Ledesma said she plans to invite her explorers to a beach party whenever they are all eventually allowed to meet up again.

Elsewhere in Southern California, all members of the Los Angeles Police Department who had been coordinating community outreach efforts for the agency have been reassigned to street patrols or other tasks related to the mitigation of the pandemic, Sgt. Keith Mott of the Department's Community Outreach and Development Division said.

That includes, for example, Officer Brittney Gutierrez, who had overseen the Volunteer Community Patrol (VCP) program at the LAPD's Topanga Division.

VCP participants are mostly local residents who give their time to drive through their neighborhoods while looking out for suspicious activity, potholes, or anything that ought to be reported to authorities, Gutierrez said. The program's membership had swelled in recent months, and each of the Topanga Division's volunteers approached their tasks with enthusiasm.

However, many of them are over the age of 60, which places them at particular risk of serious illness if they wind up infected with the novel coronavirus.

"We miss our volunteers immensely. It's been a tough time for us all," Gutierrez wrote in an email. "Before the epidemic, our volunteer patrol was doing amazing. We had VCP vehicles out almost daily. Since this epidemic, our program has been put on hold for now but we are looking forward to the day all of our volunteers come back and things go back to 'normal.'"

<https://www.dailybulletin.com/2020/04/27/coronavirus-curtails-police-and-fire-explorer-programs-in-southern-california/>